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SUBJECT: CDA HOSTS HUMAN RIGHTS LUNCH

REF: A) STATE 196666

Classified By: CDA A. F. Godfrey for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Lively discussion at a Human Rights Day lunch hosted by the Charge d'Affaires December 20 demonstrated that, while Armenia's most vocal human rights advocates agree that the upcoming parliamentary elections will not be free and fair, they do not fear airing their most damning complaints in the presence of a high-ranking government official. The CDA hosted the leaders of three prominent human rights NGOs as well as the GOAM's human rights defender. Post also published a press release about the luncheon, which received coverage in several media outlets. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) In attendance at the lunch were the government's Human Rights Defender Armen Harutyunyan (a constitutionally-mandated ombudsman position), Misha Danielyan of the Helsinki Association, Avetik Ishkhanian from the Armenian Helsinki Committee, and Susanna Vardanyan of the Women's Rights Center. Views expressed by the three human rights leaders were far from uniform. They ranged from Danielyan at one extreme ("No progress can be made under the Kocharian regime as everything he does is an illegal act.") to Ishkhanian, who expected that the process of voting on Armenia's next election day would be generally clean, but that the lead-up to elections would not be.

EVERYTHING IS ALREADY DECIDED

¶3. (C) Echoing concerns held by many voting Armenians, Danielyan said he believed the distribution of parliamentary seats has already been decided, including the provision of a few token opposition seats for the National Unity party. Ishkhanian said the voting had already been compromised by a flawed election process, including the shutting down of independent television news station A1. Despite their cynicism, both Danielyan and Ishkhanian said they were committed to monitoring the voting, but added that while the GOAM might allow international monitors to release a report after the voting, the government surely would not allow them to "influence the process." Ishkhanian said he believed an Armenian public free to vote its conscience would vote to change the current government.

¶4. (C) The group agreed that the government would not be forced to acknowledge fraud in the upcoming elections unless citizens filed complaints, which they have shown themselves reluctant to do in the past. Ishkhanian said the lack of reporting comes not from fear, but from citizens' belief that

their complaints won't make a difference. The government brushed off most complaints that arose during the seriously flawed 2005 constitutional referendum, he said. Results of recent USAID-funded polls commissioned by the International Republican Institute support Ishkhanian's theory, revealing widespread apathy and resignation among the voting public.

OMBUDSMAN TALKS THE TALK

15. (C) Echoing previous conversations with various mission staff, Harutyunyan said the outcome of the election was not as important as the process. He said the voting public was not principled, and was prone to flitting from party to party. Harutyunyan told us several weeks ago, that he was only interested in fighting fraud that would change the outcome of the voting. That said, he remarked that he did not believe fraud would affect the election results. When we called him on the apparent loophole he had left for himself, he said he was committed to raising with the government every complaint he received.

COMMENT

16. (C) While not surprising to us, the most striking part of the luncheon was the frankness with which the NGO leaders aired their complaints to Harutyunyan, whom they believe to be in the pocket of the president. Though Armenia's human rights record is far from spotless, most agree that the lack of oppressive censorship puts it in a league above many of its fellow former Soviet states.

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Harutyunyan's comments about a fickle public may be more about voters' not-unreasonable belief that opposition parties just do not count for much, and they might as well take such benefit as they can find from the process, as for example, Prosperous Armenia's attracting support with targeted philanthropy.

GODFREY